

### Home–school relations and the role of indigenous knowledge in early literacy learning: A case study from a rural school in Zambia

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IN OUR VIEW, EDUCATION LIES at the core of development. In the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 aims for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UN 2015). In this chapter, we describe a joint project implemented through master's programmes at the universities of Namibia<sup>1</sup> and Zambia in co-operation with the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (previously Hedmark University of Applied Sciences) that has prioritised finding ways to improve the quality of literacy education. Co-operation between our institutions has improved our understanding of the difficulties involved in literacy education in general and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular. The project has also contributed to capacity building, and enhanced our understanding of effective North–South collaboration in teaching and research.

In this chapter, we focus specifically on home–school relations in the development of literacy in the context of primary education in Zambia. We use the term home–school relations in the sense of a *mutual and collaborative partnership* between parents/caregivers, teachers and school management, that aims to provide a good learning environment for the pupils (LaRocque et al. 2011). Parental involvement has been proved to have positive effects on learning achievement (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), and there is much evidence that good home–school relations are conducive for learner well-being (see, for example, Epstein 2009; Patrikakou 2008). However, mismatches between the nature and uses of literacy at home and at school can also cause difficulties for children in learning literacy (Baker 2011; Brooker 2002; Heath 1983/2006).

Existing research has revealed a lack of parental<sup>2</sup> involvement in children's schoolwork (Clemensen 2011), and a study conducted by the Southern and

Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in Zambia found that less than 35 per cent of learners report that they receive assistance with homework sometimes or most times (Musonda and Kaba 2011b). In general, the challenges related to education in Zambia are high. For instance, pupils' performances in reading and mathematics are among the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa, and declined from 2000 to 2011 (SACMEQ 2017). Improving home–school relations might offer one way of meeting these challenges.

Before the advent of formal schooling, most children learned the skills they needed for their lives in their homes and local communities. This form of indigenous education was passed on from one generation to the other, so that growing up and learning was the same thing (Banda 2008; Banda and Morgan 2013). With the development of formal schooling, the link between the home and children's learning weakened, and the learning done at home and at school became more separate (Banda 2008). In post-colonial countries such as Zambia, the schooling system is based on the remnants of colonial education that was run by missionaries and overseen by their colonial masters, even though it was adapted after Zambia won back its independence in 1964. With independence, the government selected English as the language of instruction throughout the educational system, thus adding to the disparity between home and school. Because so much indigenous knowledge is embedded in language, the switch to English prevents learners from being able to use the local or indigenous knowledge that they have already acquired as a foundation for the formal school knowledge and literacy development that they obtain throughout their years at school. Indigenous forms of knowledge may be lost or discarded when an unfamiliar language is used as the medium of instruction at school.

In this chapter, we present a pilot study conducted in a rural school in Zambia. The primary objective is to explore how parents and teachers perceive the relationship between home and school in relation to the role of indigenous knowledge, with specific reference to early literacy learning. We also discuss how implications of the language policy may affect this relationship.<sup>3</sup>

### **Home–school relations**

Internationally, a huge body of research exists on the effects of home background on children's attainment in school. One seminal work is the ethnographic study conducted by Shirley Brice Heath in the United States in the early 1980s. Her study was one of the first to illustrate how literacy practices in families influence children's schooling (Heath 1983/2006). In the United Kingdom, Liz Brooker (2002) described how immigrant families

tend to remain on the peripheries of the schools their children attend, and are not involved in the practices and ideas that guide the teaching principles. A compilation of research by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) demonstrated the significant effect of 'at home good parenting'<sup>4</sup> on children's educational attainment. They concluded that to a major degree, forces outside of the control of the school shape achievement, and social factors play a large role.

Studies like these have raised awareness about home-school relations and literacy intervention programmes among educators as well as researchers (Paratore et al. 2010). According to Patrikakou (2008), there are three broad types of parental involvement: involvement at home, involvement at school and home-school communication. LaRocque et al. (2011) defined parental or family involvement as the extent to which parents or caregivers invest in the education of their children. This investment can take many forms, including parents volunteering for assistance with practical tasks at school, assisting their children with homework or engaging in events and activities initiated by the school. The form of interaction is not the key factor; what is important is that schools and parents share the same views on what constitutes a good relationship between home and school (LaRocque et al. 2011).

Another term used to describe home-school relations is *school outreach* (Galindo and Sheldon 2011). This puts more emphasis on the actions of the school management and teachers. In our opinion, a mutual relationship between home and school must include school outreach and parental involvement. The distinction between proactive and reactive relations is also a useful one (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). An example of proactive involvement is when parents and schools co-operate on a regular basis to build a good relationship. A reactive involvement means that parents act only in response to an initiative from the school; typically, this will involve a problem that requires their attention.

Joyce Epstein (2009) developed the most comprehensive model for home-school relations. Her concept of 'overlapping spheres of influence' as a theory for explaining the shared responsibilities of home, school and community has been highly influential. Her model describes six types of partnership: *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community* (Epstein 2009). In our pilot study, we applied Epstein's types of partnership to the analysis of our data, to provide a well-established theoretical framework and key definitions (Yin 2014), but also to find out whether our case corresponded to this widely acknowledged model.

In South Africa, Lemmer (2011) and Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004a, 2004b) have conducted research on family involvement. They identified several impediments to home-school co-operation (Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004a),

but also provided many examples of schools reaching out to parents in a systematic and engaged manner (Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004b). Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004b) argued that broader strategies for parental involvement should be adopted in South African schools, and Lemmer (2011) has since documented examples of formal educational provision for in-service teachers on the topic of home–school relations.

An ethnographic study in a rural community in the southern province of Zambia provides another interesting insight into the relationship between home and school. In the study, Clemensen (2011) showed that despite generally affirming the importance of schooling, parents paid little attention to the daily aspects of children’s schooling and spent little time assisting them with homework. In addition, several master’s theses submitted to the School of Education at the University of Zambia have also focused on the relations between home and school. Kapambwe (1980) investigated the home background of two hundred Zambian junior secondary pupils in relation to a number of variables and found an association between home environment and scholastic achievement. Variables included: parental education, reading habits in the home, parental income, parental occupation, housing conditions, parental attitudes to education, parental encouragement and support at home. Another relevant study is Musonda’s research on literacy behaviours among preschoolers in Lusaka (Musonda 2011). Musonda concluded that teachers seldom recognise the emergent literacy knowledge that children acquire in their early years and that parents tend to be left out of their children’s education. Musonda recommended designing adult literacy programmes to empower parents to help their children become literate (Musonda 2011).

Yet another master’s level study conducted in Zambia focused on the relationship between home and school. Kangómbé (2013) investigated the strategies or techniques that teachers use to promote partnerships with parents in high-density residential areas in Lusaka. The specific topic was collaboration in support of literacy development in selected basic schools. Kangómbé found that a homework policy was the most common approach used by teachers. His study also revealed several constraints on home–school partnerships, such as high illiteracy levels, high levels of poverty, lack of English proficiency among parents and low attendance at school meetings. However, some parents also felt that teachers were unwelcoming, and mentioned the lack of communication between them and the teachers.

Another research report on Zambia (Ginsburg et al. 2014) provides a quantitative study of interschool factors affecting pupils’ opportunities to learn. In this case, the researchers looked for effects on learning outcomes in relation to a number of variables. They found that only low attendance among

learners (including late arrival and early departure) had a significant effect on learning outcomes at the school level. The researchers recommended that future research direct attention towards learners' opportunities to learn *outside* of school, thus pointing to the findings by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003).

### **Indigenous knowledge and education**

Indigenous knowledge is not a clear-cut concept and is defined in various ways in the literature. Most definitions include notions about knowledge derived from the way people live in a given sociocultural context over a period of time (Shizha and Abdi 2014). Avoseh (2012) stressed that the holistic worldview of traditional African systems of knowledge places a strong emphasis on achieving an equal relationship between life and learning. According to Akena (2012), indigenous knowledge is a complex accumulation of context-relevant knowledge that embraces the essence of ancestral knowing as well as the legacies of diverse history and culture. Those who have published work about research done in Africa often use the terms 'indigenous knowledge' and 'traditional knowledge' interchangeably. Interestingly, Dei's (2000) conceptualisation of indigenous knowledge as a body of knowledge associated with both traditional norms and values combined with a long-term occupancy of a certain place can apply to both terms.

In the context of this chapter, it is relevant to consider the relationship between indigenous knowledge and educational systems. UNESCO (1999) refers to indigenous knowledge as a large body of knowledge and skills that has been developed outside the formal education system, and which enables communities to survive. Several authors, including Breilid (2013) and Mkosi (2005) distinguish indigenous knowledge from Western knowledge. They emphasise that indigenous knowledge is not produced by following prescriptive regulations or methods, but is developed by people seeking solutions to everyday problems. Another characteristic is that indigenous knowledge is often orally transmitted and passed on, and much of it refers to daily habits linked to our subsistence activities (how we live). By contrast, much Western knowledge tends to be written down in books and found in educational curricula.

However, this dichotomisation of knowledge has been widely critiqued. For instance, Stephens (2015) explained that it is theoretically problematic to characterise knowledge as Western or indigenous. Stephens argued that it makes more sense to talk about multiple domains and types of knowledge, with differing logics and epistemologies, rather than two distinct categories. Klein (2011) pointed out that in all societies, knowledge is constantly hybridised and mediated in the local context. Thus, by considering indigenous

knowledge as pragmatic and flexible, negotiable and dynamic, we arrive at a more precise and useful concept (Briggs 2005).

Regardless of these theoretical debates, however, the need to link education to children's real experiences is urgent. Banda (2008) described how the school system can alienate children from their home culture when their language, skills and knowledge are rendered invisible, irrelevant and unintegrated into their experience of schooling. Banda and Morgan (2013) showed how traditional education among the Chewa people in Zambia consists of specific training stages that youth have to complete. These stages include aspects of both formal and non-formal learning, but are not recognised by the education authorities. Interestingly, the country's 2013 Education Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education 2013: 19–20) encourages the inclusion of traditional knowledge in education as follows:

In making the curriculum flexible and responsive to learner and societal needs, institutions of learning, teachers and teacher-educators are encouraged at all levels of our education systems to localise some aspects of the school curriculum...In this way, the curriculum will provide some compensation for the indigenous knowledge, values, attitudes and practical skills that learners would have acquired in their home environment if they had not been attending school.

Despite these good intentions, Banda and Morgan (2013) argue that traditional knowledge is still not skilfully included in Zambian school curricula. They suggested that, for instance, Chewa folklore could be seen as complementary to and supportive of formal schooling, especially during early childhood education. They argue that including traditional teachings regarding morals, attitudes and values could help form some common ground between formal schooling and Chewa indigenous knowledge systems. Traditional teachings could also provide a basis for several formal school subjects, such as science, geography and agricultural science. Several studies have found that including traditional knowledge in formal education has the potential of reducing dropout rates and disciplinary problems, as well as improving learner literacy (see for example, Klein 2011 and Nungu 2014).

### **Literacy learning and the choice of language as medium of instruction**

Literacy is regarded as key to a successful education, and crucial for economic, social and political participation (UNESCO 2006). The concept of literacy has developed from a relatively restricted view of reading and writing as individual skills to a broader perspective in which literacy is regarded as social practices that vary according to time and space (Street 2003). However,

literacy can still be said to comprise text-related activities and concerns the ways in which reading and writing as social practices play a role in people's lives (Barton 2007).

With regard to literacy learning, the most valuable resources that children bring from their home are their oral language skills and early literacy experiences, such as storytelling, songs, rhymes and riddles, occasional writing, like making lists and letters, memorising books or religious verses, etc. Tambulukani (2015) underscored that oral skills, such as songs, games and rhymes, are a strong feature of emergent literacy and should continue to be practised in class when children enter school. Emergent literacy experiences reflect some of the literacy practices embedded in the daily lives of the families and represent the foundations of children's literacy development in early schooling (Brooker 2002; Heath 1983/2006; Tambulukani 2015). Furthermore, since these literacy experiences are embedded in the language practices of the home, if these skills are not given space at school, and if the language of instruction is different to the one(s) spoken at home, the disjuncture between home and school is likely to be felt more strongly by children and to continue to grow as they progress through school.

In multilingual contexts, endeavours to include children's home language/s have also been shown to have a positive effect on parental inclusion (Danbolt 2011). In an ethnographic study of bilingual education in two rural communities in Mozambique, Chimbutane (2011) explored the effects of introducing bilingual education in the first years of primary education. He described how bilingual education facilitated the incorporation of culturally relevant topics into the curriculum, facilitated the involvement of parents in the schooling of their children and, as such, empowered the community. Besides involving the parents, the use of a local language in education also facilitated the involvement of other community members in the school, bringing intellectual resources from outside into the classroom. This study clearly revealed that the choice of language as medium of instruction has significance for the inclusion of parents and of locally embedded knowledge into schooling, and this has the potential to enhance the linkages that both children and parents experience between home and school.

### **Some basic background on schooling in Zambia**

Since gaining independence in 1964, Zambia has followed a monolingual model of language of instruction where English is used as the medium of instruction from preschool to higher education. The seven regional languages of Zambia (zonal languages) were taught as subjects at some secondary schools and as optional subjects taken by a few pupils at others. When the

Primary Reading Programme was introduced (Musonda and Kaba 2011b; Tambulukani 2015), one hour of basic literacy was taught each day in the zonal languages in the first grade. However, the language of instruction was still English.

In 2013, the Zambian government adopted a bilingual and transitional model, using a zonal language as the medium of instruction from Grades 1 to 4 and teaching English as a subject only. English became the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onwards. According to the new language policy, the zonal language is to be used as the medium of instruction in all subjects for the first four years. Studies have shown that children who learn initial literacy in a mother tongue, and move to English when they have reached a level of fluency in the first language, tend to read better both in their mother tongue and in English than those who are subjected to English as medium of instruction from Grade 1 (Banda 2012; Tambulukani 2015).

Free primary education was introduced in Zambia in 2002, in an effort to attain the Millennium Development Goals and ensure full enrolment (Musonda and Kaba 2011b). Previously, parents had to provide school uniforms and learning materials, even for primary education, and many parents struggled to afford these. The introduction of free primary education led to a vast increase in enrolment, thus putting considerable pressure on the country's education system. By 2007, 41 per cent of Zambian learners in Grade 6 did not have basic items such as textbooks, a pen, pencil or a ruler. In government schools, as many as 60 per cent of the learners did not have these items. Clearly, a lack of textbooks is a serious impediment to parental involvement in homework.

Another factor influencing home–school relations is class size. Musonda and Kaba (2011a) also noted that in 2007, the average number of Grade 6 pupils per class was 46, exceeding the national benchmark level of a maximum of 40 learners per class. Being responsible for such large numbers of students makes it very difficult for teachers to reach out to parents, especially on an individual basis.

Under the Primary Reading Programme, a manual was developed to give parents or guardians guidelines on how they could participate in the learning of their children (Mitchell et al. 1999). Parents were encouraged to sit in on classes alongside the children to see how learning takes place, and to help in any ways that they thought would enhance their child's learning. In the document, parents were asked to sign their children's homework exercise books following the completion of each homework assignment. In this way, it was hoped that parents would not just help their children to do their school homework, but also prioritise time away from many household chores for



their children. Research has shown that although the reading programme was positively received, many aspects of the programme were difficult to sustain once donor funding ended (Kombe and Herman 2017). There were also reports of teachers being reluctant to invite parents into their classrooms because they felt supervised, or parents asked questions as if they were learners, and thus displayed misconceptions about their roles in the partnership.

### **Methodology and fieldwork**

As in much qualitative research, our project focused on a specific topic. There is limited research on home–school relations within Zambia, so we chose an exploratory case study to investigate this phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin 2014). An exploratory case study is useful prior to more substantial fieldwork, as it allows for small-scale data collection to be conducted before the research questions are fully developed. From the exploratory study, we sought in-depth understanding of the topic from the participants' point of view. We therefore applied a single-case design, examining in detail one case within a limited geographical area. Themes that emerged from this, and that we plan to investigate further, are the multiple causes of absenteeism and the vast potential for integrating local knowledge and practices into schools. Although we did not intend to generalise our findings, we believe that they do have transferability to other small studies in similar contexts.

The data were collected at a government primary school in a rural area in Zambia. When the data were collected, the school had approximately 800 learners and a teaching staff of 17. It can be regarded as a typical case, as nearly 65 per cent of schools in Zambia are situated in a rural area (Musonda and Kaba 2011b), and the average number of learners per class was 47, compared to the national average of 46 (Musonda and Kaba 2011a). Teaching took place in two sessions every day to accommodate the large number of learners. In terms of resources, the school is in the lower range, and was currently building new classrooms to ease overcrowding and improve learning conditions.

The school had previously hosted researchers for visits and observations, and the staff and parents were willing to share their experiences on the issue of home–school relations. We collected data using a mix of methods consisting of focus-group interviews, individual semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. Focus-group interviews are useful for gathering data from people who share a common experience (Yin 2014). Ours were conducted with parents in one group and teachers in another. This was done because we assumed the parents would speak more freely if the teachers were not present, and vice versa. The questionnaires were distributed to the teachers a few days after they had participated in the focus groups.

We chose not to interview pupils in this pilot, as such interviews ideally should be conducted once researchers have had time to build trust with the children and make them feel confident. In a school context, learners often fear that their statements will be communicated to their parents or teachers. Their vulnerability must be carefully taken into account by researchers when using children as informants. In the full-scale research project, children will be involved to ensure that their perspectives inform the study.

Our data is thus drawn from: a focus-group with 11 parents (1 hour and 26 mins); a focus group with seven teachers, one male, six females (just over an hour long); and an individual interview with the head teacher (also just over an hour). Questionnaires were distributed to the seven teachers.

The interview with the parents was conducted in Chinyanja, the zonal language of the region in which the school is situated, and it was moderated by a member of the research team from the University of Zambia. The other interviews were conducted in English. A member of the research team, who was present at the interviews, transcribed the interviews with the teachers and head teacher, while the interview with the parents was transcribed and translated into English by a research assistant at the School of Education at the University of Zambia. Having members of the research team who could speak the zonal language was of great importance in making communication with parents possible. These team members were also able to compare what was said in the parents' interview with the English translation and helped us to avoid losing any information. The interviews and the questionnaires were analysed by means of content analysis, including juxtaposing data from the three groups of interviewees and searching for patterns that emerged in relation to our research questions. The data from the interviews and the questionnaires were compared for consistency.

### **Presentation of data and analysis**

We explored how parents and teachers perceive the relationship between home and school with a specific focus on early literacy learning in relation to the role of indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, as this was a pilot study, our aim was to test and refine our research instruments and explore the topic in a small-scale setting. We analysed the material using inductive open coding. Five major themes emerged: absenteeism, communication and contribution, behaviour and respect, agricultural activities, and local literacy practices.

While the study was small, and as noted, we did not set out to generalise our findings, we believe it has value in both illuminating the themes that emerged, and in having the potential to generate further hypotheses, and we offer our analysis in this light.

### Absenteeism: a strain on the relationship

Parents and teachers mentioned the problem of absenteeism, but the concept has different meanings for the two groups. Parents complained about *teacher* absenteeism several times during the focus group interview, and their words could be quite harsh. One respondent noted that ‘many teachers absent themselves from work due to excessive beer drinking but many are also involved in small businesses and other business ventures’. The parents pointed to the challenge teachers face in finding accommodation and noted that most rent places to live some distance away from the school. It must be noted, of course, that the parents were not necessarily speaking about the teachers that took part in this study, but about teachers in general. In any case, the parents’ statements point to a problem that is evident in other research, for instance Ginsburg et al. (2014), where teacher absenteeism is estimated to cause on average a loss of almost 14 school days per year.

On the other hand, the teachers focused on *learner* absenteeism. They mentioned that children are absent because they take part in economic activities when it comes to ‘the season when it is farming’. Since they live in an area where agriculture is the main means of livelihood, teachers seemed to have an understanding of this. However, learners arriving late or being absent from school is a serious impediment to progress in learning, as documented by Ginsburg et al. (2014). The head teacher also mentioned initiation ceremonies as an example of a practice that causes absenteeism among learners. He expressed concern about this, noting that some parents keep their girls at home for a long period of time when they reach puberty<sup>5</sup>. The government has put initiatives in place to advise parents on this issue, and the teachers stated that it is no longer practised within their community. The teachers seemed thus to be less willing than the head teacher to talk about these challenges, and we may here touch upon what is considered secret knowledge in the community. There may be practices that are kept away from strangers posing questions about issues that are considered private. Parents may, in any case, need to be advised about the drawbacks of their children’s absence from school, as they may not be fully aware of the negative consequences. However, as the problem of absenteeism seems to occur on both sides, this issue has the potential to create a stand-off rather than enhance relations between home and school.

Absenteeism thus emerged as a strain on the relationship, and jeopardises a good learning environment for the children. However, the issue also points to more profound challenges: the struggle for both teachers and parents to maintain daily subsistence.

### Communication and co-operation: 'quite limited'

The data show few traces of effective communication between the parents and teachers about the school's programmes or the children's progress. Although the parents reported that they could present complaints to the head teacher as well as participate in annual general meetings and parent-teacher meetings, their answer to the question of whether the teachers had invited them to talk about cross-cutting issues or the welfare of their children was negative. Concerning the school's outreach activities, parents said explicitly that the teachers do not invite them. The teachers also admitted that their interaction with parents is 'quite limited'. The head teacher said that the school arranges an open day, usually in the second term. However, they no longer bring the parents into the classroom, 'because some of them do not want to be exposed to the children. They only want to talk to the teacher.'

Apart from the prescribed meetings, communication between home and school seems to take place when there is a problem to be solved. The head teacher stated that teachers call on the parents 'sometimes when they have difficulties with the children'. Such problem-oriented communication is often the norm (Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004b) and must also be considered an impediment to a good relationship, especially if this reactive strategy is not balanced by other more positive interactions.

The extent to which families are involved in decision-making about the school (Epstein 2009) is unclear from our data. The annual parent-teacher meeting is probably the one forum in which parents could exert some influence, but our data indicate that influence from the parents on decision-making is scarce, and they are rarely involved in the everyday life of the school.

Despite this, there are instances of parents contributing to the school. The head teacher noted that some parents helped by making bricks and taking part in the construction of new classrooms at the school. We also learned from the head teacher that some parents are willing to share their knowledge and skills of the local culture with the teachers, but this does not seem to be part of any systematic form of co-operation. *Volunteering* is one of the categories in Epstein's framework, but it seemed to have a limited role in the daily life at this school. The head teacher noted that asking parents to contribute is not straightforward; most are working, and would expect payment if they had to take time off from work. He said that while parents could offer indigenous skills, such as in craft, traditional songs, stories and folklore, the school has no resources to reimburse parents for any loss of income incurred if they help out at the school.

It seems that, at this school, the head teacher plays a mediating role between parents and teachers. He is the one to step in and cover for absent teachers, and

the one who receives complaints from the parents. He also maintains close contact with the representatives of the local traditional leaders and attempts to communicate with the parents through these elected representatives. The parents expressed their trust in the head teacher, and he was not a target of complaints in the interview we had with parents. This might imply that the head teacher could play a crucial role in improving the home–school relationship, which would be in line with research findings by Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004b).

### **Behaviour and respect: concordance of values**

A distinct feature of the data is the concordance between statements by parents, teachers and the head teacher on values such as respect for adults and good conduct. The teachers placed much emphasis on good behaviour, as ‘an ongoing thing apart from subjects’, while the parents explicitly stated that respect should be taught at home and at school. However, some parents complained about some children becoming bullies when they start school, due to negative peer influence. Parents did not seem to relate this to the role of the teachers, however, and seemed to see the teachers as their allies when it came to teaching learners about good behaviour.

Some examples were given of parents and teachers learning from each other, which in Epstein’s framework falls within the category of *parenting* (Epstein 2009). For instance, the head teacher reported that some teachers had visited the parents of a child with disabilities, so they could find out how to take care of the child at school. In the questionnaires, the teachers expressed willingness to learn more about traditional child-rearing and parenting practices in the school catchment area. One of the teachers expanded on this by writing: ‘As a teacher I move around in the villages to see and learn from the parents.’ Interestingly, all the teachers who took part in the group interview were from other parts of Zambia and were not native to the area. They all seemed to see the need to learn about local practices and to comply with the traditional norms and values concerning the children’s upbringing. This concordance of values, combined with the teachers’ willingness to learn from the parents, could form the basis for an improved relationship.

### **Agricultural activities: a common experience**

As noted, the school is located in a rural area, and the teachers often mentioned agricultural activities as examples of how they link their teaching practice to local knowledge. There seemed to be a positive attitude among the teachers concerning indigenous knowledge as a resource, and the teachers listed many examples of indigenous forms of learning in the

questionnaires, including: pastoralism, poultry rearing, chiyato,<sup>6</sup> playing in the soil, drawing and writing, and requesting that the learners bring a specific number of items, for example, bottle-tops, to be counted as an activity to enhance numeracy. The head teacher mentioned that they previously used a localised curriculum, where the parents contributed by teaching crafts. This curriculum was no longer in place, as it had been difficult to include the contribution from the parents in a systematic way.

Interestingly, one of the teachers challenged the idea of localised curricula noting that, 'At the end of the day, we must educate the children so they fit in the global market.' This statement illustrates a dilemma that both the teachers and parents seem to feel. On this point, the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework gives little more than general guidance, stating that: 'The curriculum development process should take a global view of the new trends, strategies and practices, and embrace indigenous heritage and thoughts that could fit in the local and national situation' (Ministry of Education 2013: 56). The challenge is to adapt elements of indigenous knowledge in ways that enhance learning outcomes, and the teacher's statement revealed that teachers require more knowledge on this issue. For instance, Baker (2011) emphasised how providing early literacy education in a language that is familiar to a child, including content that builds on their primary experiences, provides a better foundation for their educational success at every subsequent level.

### Literacy practices in the community: a potential for improved relations

In our study, the parents said that they try to teach the children traditional stories and songs. They also said that they teach their children everyday calculations by checking the amount they return after having been given money to buy something from the market. Some had storybooks, Bibles and calendars but others had no reading material for children in their homes. On the other hand, all seven teachers answered 'yes' to a question about whether they use local games, songs, riddles and tongue-twisters in their teaching.

Under the category described by Epstein (2009) as *learning at home*, we found that parents keep up the traditions and try to infuse their children with oral and/or written texts that form part of their culture. The head teacher emphasised that the teachers try to make use of traditional songs and stories especially in the first few years of schooling. And as previously mentioned, the teachers expressed willingness to learn from the parents. However, co-operation around homework does not occur. This corresponds to findings by Clemensen (2011). The limits on resources available to learners are very evident here as very few children had their own books to take home (Musonda and Kaba 2011a). However, the mutual understanding between

parents and teachers of the benefit of building on children's existing oral skills may provide grounds for extending their co-operation.

### **Final reflections**

Despite the limited scale of this study, interesting patterns emerged. In line with research in South Africa (Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004b) and Zambia (Kangómbé 2013) this study uncovered several impediments to good home-school relations. An obvious one is the lack of resources: large numbers of learners in each class, and the need to attend to everyday obligations, leave parents and teachers little time to spare for the extra effort of building a relationship between home and school. Another impediment is the tension in the relationship between parents and teachers, as evident in the parents' complaints about teacher absenteeism and the lack of invitations from teachers to talk about their children. Further research on the causes of absenteeism is needed, as this not only deprives learners of opportunities to learn, but also hampers a good relationship between home and school.

On the other hand, mutual adherence to traditional norms and values concerning the upbringing of children could provide a platform for improving this relationship. In addition, both teachers and parents speak positively of the role of indigenous knowledge related to agricultural activities, and this seems to offer great potential for education in general and for literacy education in particular. Situated and local knowledge embedded in community practices featured in the statements from all participants in the study. The potential for integrating local knowledge and practices into the everyday life of the school could bring the community and the school closer together thus renewing and improving relations between home and school. This also requires teachers and parents to be better informed about the potential benefits for children's success at school and their willingness to collaborate in building an infrastructure for systematic home-school co-operation.

In this study, the head teacher played a crucial role in mediating relations between home and school. Any steps towards improvement of this relationship should involve the school's leaders, as they often possess the key to communication between teachers and parents.

This pilot study revealed the potential for a closer relationship between home and school by including indigenous knowledge in early literacy learning. Furthermore, it informed the design of our larger study by emphasising the necessity of obtaining a deeper understanding of how local communities perceive this relationship. To get a broader picture, schoolchildren will be included in the larger study, and observations of parent-teacher meetings will be added to the data sources.

In our opinion, improved communication between home and school could be a first step towards empowering parents to assist their children with their literacy learning. The conditions for a positive home–school relationship should become more favourable as the language policy changed in 2013, and a familiar local language is now used as the language of instruction for children from Grades 1 to 4. This language policy should also have the potential to create a closer relationship between home and school, to the benefit of learners, parents and teachers.

## Notes

- 1 From 2008 until 2013, the University of Namibia’s participation in this project was funded by the Norwegian government’s funding agency Norad, under its Programme for Master’s Studies. However, as a middle-income country, Namibia has since been removed from the list of partner countries funded by Norad, and became ineligible as a partner in the continued collaboration. This is illustrative of the kinds of challenges facing sustainable partnerships in higher education and shows how vulnerable North–South co-operation is to the political priorities set by donor countries.
- 2 We use the term ‘parent’ as defined in the Zambian Education Act of 2011 to include ‘a guardian or a person who has the actual custody of the child’ (Chapter 1, Definitions).
- 3 We intend to use the insights obtained from this pilot study in a broader research project under the umbrella of the Literacy Education in Multilingual Settings Project (LEMS) that received funding from the Norwegian Partnership Programme for Global Academic Cooperation in 2016. The LEMS project is an extension of the co-operation between the University of Zambia and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, and allows for a more comprehensive research project, involving faculty from the two universities as well as master’s and PhD students.
- 4 This includes parents providing a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation that includes spending time interacting with their child, and a set of values to aspire to as well as maintaining contact with schools to share information, etc. (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).
- 5 On the practical challenges of managing menstruation in low-income settings, see Nanda et al. (2016).
- 6 Chiyato is a traditional game that uses pebbles and enhances numeracy skills.



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